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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 002876

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/10/2014
TAGS: KN KS PGOV PREL PINR
SUBJECT: SENIOR KBS CORRESPONDENTS SEE GNP'S VICTORY
INEVITABLE

Classified By: POL Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: According to two senior Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) correspondents, Lee Myung-bak would be victorious in December, not because of Lee's qualities or performance, but because of three big macro trends in Korean society: less nationalism, more suspicion of North Korea, and more demand for economic growth. They added that a recent Blue House scandal that had dominated the press for the last 10 days had serious negative ramifications for the progressive cause in Korea. End Summary.

Three Reasons Why Lee Will Win

¶2. (C) Ko Dae-young, one of the most senior and respected reporters from Korea's national network, KBS, is a frequent Embassy contact whose insights on a wide range of topics have proved accurate. He was KBS' first Moscow correspondent in 1991, reported on the Bosnian conflict and most recently was responsible for KBS reporting on National Assembly affairs. Ko was firmly convinced of a conservative victory in December, citing three macro trends in Korean society that would shape the electorate's response.

¶3. (C) First, the 2002 election, which resulted in a progressive victory occurred at a high-point of Korean nationalism, following the first time in history that Korean athletes (and Korea) were receiving undivided global attention for a pioneering World Cup performance. Koreans had never before been so optimistic, confident, and united as they were in the heady months after the 2002 World Cup, and this immense psychological rush translated into unprecedented political optimism and idealism, that "anything was possible" if Koreans just tried. The emergence of nationalism favored Roh Moo-hyun, who pledged that Korea could stand up to the U.S. and other powers. This year, Koreans see a continuing need for the U.S., both economically and politically.

¶4. (C) Second, the 2002 election was preceded by constant, symbolic improvements in North-South dialogue. Now, however, Korean voters are more concerned with the DPRK's recent erratic behavior and lack of reciprocal actions to "pay" for all the aid the South has extended; most Koreans want a more pragmatic approach to the North. Ko noticed that many young voters who supported Roh in 2002 were now more hard-nosed, asking why South Koreans had to economically support North

Korea for nothing in return.

¶15. (C) The third trend was that while Koreans were statistically wealthier than five years ago, they perceived themselves as being poorer than they were in 2002. Ko attributed perceived sense of wealth in 2002, to the post-IMF credit bounce. Ko stated that this cognitive dissonance worked strongly in favor of Lee Myung-back, since his business background lent credibility to his promise to focus on the economy in a way that ordinary politicians cannot.

Lee Myung-bak: Powerless without Park?

¶16. (C) Poloff asked Ko what he thought might happen to the Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye relationship in the future, observing that some Lee Myung-bak staffers had mentioned offering key positions in a future administration to moderates and progressives. Ko said that all of Park's supporters had already moved firmly to support Lee. There was no possibility that Lee could forge an independent political faction and forsake Park, since his background was in business and not politics, and he therefore had no real supporters and power base within conservative circles. Ko said that Lee's current support levels came from the fact that his profile best matches up with the three trends cited, but that Lee was powerless to lead and govern as a conservative president without the full support of Park Geun-hye and her base of traditional, conservative support.

Shin Jeong-ah Scandal: Death Knell for Progressives?

¶17. (C) Ko said that the Shin Jeong-ah scandal would damage significantly the liberal UNDP. People were appalled not just by the tawdriness of the alleged extramarital affair and Shin's fake academic credentials, but that a senior Blue House officer was behind all of this, pressuring a university to hire his purported mistress and using public funds to purchase art through his art-dealer lover. Ko said that regardless of how the public finally interpreted this latest scandal, the public's impression of President Roh as a clueless president, betrayed by his closest aides, was the last thing that the progressives needed with less than 100 days left before the presidential election.

VERSHBOW